DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 433 582 EA 029 548

AUTHOR Bennett, Nigel
TITLE Single-Sex Teaching in Response to a Competitive Market: The Local Operation of a National Policy in England.
PUB DATE 1997-03-00
NOTE 26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 24-28, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Foreign Countries; *Parent Attitudes; Parent School Relationship; *School Choice; School Demography; Student Mobility
IDENTIFIERS *England; *Single Sex Classes

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the local operation of educational provision in a small English town. It is based on 771 surveys received from parents whose children went to four mixed schools in the town in 1995. The survey asked about the family situation, parents' degree of choice in selecting a school for their children, and the influence of single-sex teaching in making that choice. The survey addressed six questions, such as To what extent were differences to be found among the four schools in the factors influencing the parents' choice of that school? and To what extent were the pattern of responses consistent between social classes? The findings show that the factors influencing parental choice are complicated. The differences among parents' priorities in choosing schools were not so much ideological as they were derived from a complex mix of practical concerns and a wish to help their children. The results show that the location of a pupil's home was unimportant in terms of the attitudes expressed in the survey. Single-sex teaching was clearly a positive reason for choice far more often than it was a negative reason for rejecting a school. Although many factors contributed to school choice, relatively few of them were widely shared. (Contains four references and nine tables.) (RJM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

N. Bennett

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

ED 433 582

Single-Sex Teaching In Response To A Competitive Market: The Local Operation Of A National Policy In England.

A paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, March 1997

Nigel Bennett
Centre for Educational Policy and Management
School of Education
The Open University
United Kingdom

Draft paper: please do not cite or quote without permission.

Comments on the paper would be very welcome: address for correspondence:

Dr. Nigel Bennett,
Lecturer in Educational Management
The Open University,
Centre for Educational Policy and Management
Walton Hall,
Milton Keynes,
MK7 6AA

e-mail: N.D.Bennett@open.ac.uk

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

EA 029 548

Single-Sex Teaching
In Response To A Competitive Market:
The Local Operation Of A National Policy In England.

Nigel Bennett

Abstract

A survey of the reasons why parents chose to send their children to particular schools in a small town adjacent to a large conurbation found that although there were a number of factors which influenced decisions strongly, these were not uniformly influencing the parents of all the schools. The differences are highliighted and discussed. In particular, the impact of one school's decision to introduce single-sex teaching was a strong influence on parents choosing that school, but was of marginal importance at most for the others. Data are presented from the survey and related to issues of geographical location of the home and social class, and the factors influencing the choice of each of the four schools surveyed are compared.

Introduction and background.

This paper reports on aspects of an investigation into the workings of a local market in educational provision in a small town in England. The town lies on the eastern outskirts of a major conurbation, from which it is physically separate but to which it is integrally connected in that many of its inhabitants travel to work there. It is a largely white middle-class town, as are the villages which surround it, although there are some working-class developments around the fringes of the town. About twelve miles to the north-east is the large county town, while a similar distance to the south-east lies a major "new town", one of several such towns in the UK which were founded in the 1950s and 1960s as a means of clearing the urban slums. There are also two smaller towns about seven miles from our subject. One of them has two secondary schools, while the other saw its only secondary school close in the mid-1980s.

The borough council which is responsible for local government in the town covers, in addition, a number of villages to the south, north and north-east. Within its borders are six state-run secondary schools, plus a number of small private establishments and one large "public" (i.e., high-status private) school. This private sector provides a selective education for children aged 11 and over, and in addition children

from the borough can apply for places at the two grammar schools in the county town. In practice, only a small number obtain places there. The six secondary state schools consist of four mixed state schools, all of similar size, which are located around the town; a smaller mixed state school which is situated in an outlying village, and a Catholic girls' school which originated as a convent school and still retains the name of the order of nuns in its own name. This school is almost exclusively peopled by Catholic children, and a proportion of the town's catholic boys obtain places in a church school in the neighbouring urban authority. A brief summary of the six state schools is given in table 1.

There has always been a problem within the borough area that technically there were more schools than pupils to fill them. This situation became steadily more acute through the 1970s and 1980s as, in common with the rest of the country the number of pupils available to take up places at schools fells steadily. The obvious candidate for closure after the move to make the schools comprehensive was school 6, but at that time the idea of closing a village school was politically unacceptable. Since this question arose at the time when the United Kingdom was joining the European Economic Community, the policy was adopted of giving the school a "European" curriculum and over time the result has been to generate for the school a county-wide catchment area, with children whose families can demonstrate a "European connection" coming from considerable distances to join the village children at the school. It usually has many more applications than places available, and has been in this position for many years.

Consequently, we may regard the competition for pupils within our town as being between schools 2, 3, 4 and 5. The possibility of competition had been acknowledged from the very beginning of the comprehensive era, when the schools were allocated areas of the town as "priority allocation areas" (PAAs) and obliged to offer a place to any pupil who lived in the area, but the parents were not obliged to take up that place if they could obtain a place at one of the other schools in the town. The early history of this competitive situation was outlined in Bennett (1996), and the situation at January 1993 can be summarised as follows:

School 2 was suffering a serious decline in the number of children applying for a place, and was widely regarded as the "sink" school within the town. Despite this, its 16+ examination results as published by the government were around the average for both the nation and the county. Its headteacher, who had taken up his post at the end of the 1970s when the school had had to cope with a serious scandal involving his predecessor, had retired and a new head was about to take up the post.

School 3 was sustaining its pupil numbers at slightly below its nominal roll. Its academic performance was good, both in 16+ and 18+ examinations. its central position in the town made it readily accessible both to the pupils in its very small PAA and to those from further afield, and there was a tradition of attending this school in some of the villages to the south east.

School 5 was developing a very strong position. Since the mid-1980s it had successfully raised its intake, drawing children from a wider area outside the town, particular from the new town area to the south-east, as well as increasing the percentage of children in its PAA who took up places in the school. Its academic performance was comparable with the schools 3 and 4, and it also placed a very strong emphasis on "traditional" "grammar school" rituals, such as requiring children to stop whatever they were doing and stand up whenever an adult entered a classroom.

School 4 was not recruiting as successfully as schools 3 and 5, partly because of its small PAA and also because it was relatively inaccessible, although it was retaining its intake at a steady level. Although its academic performance was comparable to the other two larger schools, it was suffering at the expense of school 5, which appeared to be acquiring a reputation as "more academic". However, as long as school 2 was in serious difficulties, there was little need to worry.

Two major changes.

The first change was made by the new headteacher of school 2. Having obtained a late surge in numbers from an area of the metropolitan authority to the west, he set out to develop a new market and did so with devastating effect. The intake doubled between 1993 and 1994, and increased again in 1995 to a level which was maintained in 1996. Having been "touting for custom" in 1993, it was technically oversubscribed the following year. This change was accompanied by a systematic marketing drive in the town itself, including a change of the arrangements by which parents were enabled to look round the school and judge its quality: instead of an "open evening", the school opened on a Saturday and promoted a range of academic-related activities to show off the school to best advantage. At the same time as pupil numbers at school 2 increased dramatically from the neighbouring authority, a similar though smaller development occurred at school 3, although this occurred without the overt marketing adopted by school 2.

This change of attitude and status on the part of school 2 had implications for school 4. Its small PAA meant that it had to look to the areas served by other schools for

pupils, and its location meant that a child coming from outside town from any direction except the north east would have to pass another town school on their way. The need to differentiate school 4 somehow from its competitors led to the decision in September 1993 to introduce single-sex teaching from the following September for that year's intake, and for all subsequent intakes. In the first year this produced no change in the number of pupils admitted, but in both 1995 and 1996 the intake has increased. All four schools in the town are now oversubscribed, and because they are all "grant maintained" - that is to say, they receive their income direct from the central government rather than from the local education authority, and are free to spend it as they see fit provided they meet central government requirements - a parent has to apply separately to each school. There is therefore no need for the parents to rank these schools in an order of preference.

The situation being examined.

A number of points should be made in the light of this introduction, since they affect the nature of the investigation and have implications for the ideas being examined. First, it is clear that the "market" for education in the town has changed substantially over time. From the original situation as a group of schools providing education for the children of their town, the boundaries of the market have changed and extended considerably. The schools are no longer competing simply with one another in a local competitive arena (see Woods, 1994); rather, they have extended their competitive task into other competitive arenas, creating a potentially multi-faceted set of concerns that they need to address. Deriving from this is a second point, that parents choosing our four schools may have a range of different reasons for making their choice depending on where they are coming from and what alternative choices they might be able to make. Third, the appearance in the market of a school which, while attempting to sustain its competitive position relative to the others has also attempted to differentiate its mode of operation and the teaching arrangements provided, has introduced the possibility that there might not be one market that we need to examine, but several. These questions will be taken into consideration in the analysis of data that follows.

The nature of the study.

The study which has been undertaken has involved a survey of parents whose children took up places at the four mixed schools in the town in September 1995, amplified by data from the schools themselves on the size of their 1996 intakes and where they lived. Thus we are able to examine the distribution of families who have decided to use each of the four schools, and to identify how similar they are over two

consecutive years. There will be a further survey undertaken of the 1997 intakes to amplify on these data, and to compare the factors identified by parents in the light of a number of changes which have occurred in the circumstances of individual schools since the first survey was undertaken in summer 1995.

The survey itself was based on a slightly modified version of the questionnaire employed in the PASCI (Parent and School Choice Interaction) study undertaken at the Open University (see, for example, Glatter et al. 1997, Bagley et al. 1996, Woods 1994). This provided information about family situation, previous experience of the schools concerned, the degree of choice respondents felt they had, their preferences among the schools they saw as available, the sources of information they used, and the factors which inclined them to favour the particular school of their choice. The main changes that was made was to include a reference to "single-sex teaching" in the factors influencing choice alongside the factor "single sex school", and to ask parents to comment explicitly on whether or not this was an issue affecting their choice. A total of 771 responses were received from the 940 distributed, a response rate of 82%. However, the respondents were asked to answer the questions in relation to the school they regarded as their first choice, which may not have been the school which their child finally attended. A total of 128 questionnaires indicated that they would have preferred their children not to have gone to any of the Brentwood schools, a total of 16.6%. The data which follow are there based upon a sample of 643 responses. To ensure that the data were not contaminated by news of what their child's experience was really like, the survey was undertaken in May to July 1995, prior to the children starting at the secondary school in the September.

In this paper, we shall examine the data to investigate the following six questions:

- To what extent were differences to be found between the four schools in the factors influencing the parents' choice of that school?
- To what extent were the pattern of responses consistent between social classes?
- How consistent was the distribution of social classes across the four schools?
- Were there clear geographical differences between the sources of children for the four schools, or were they clearly in competition in the same area?
- Is it possible to link the geographical location of the schools' intakes with the factors influencing their choice of school?

- Insofar as the issue of single-sex teaching was cited, was it a positive reason for choosing school 4 or a positive reason for choosing another school instead of school 4?

Factors influencing parents' choice of school: the general picture.

The questionnaire offered a choice of 34 possible factors that might have influenced families' choice of school. These included factors relating to school staff and facilities, the atmosphere, emphasis and policies identified in the school, children's feelings, location, and the availability of alternatives. Respondents were asked to indicate all the factors which influenced them, and then to identify the three most important factors and rank them in order of importance.

A total of twelve factors were cited by more than 50% of all the respondents who favoured one of our four schools as an influence upon their choice. Three of them: the school's reputation, the standard of academic education, and the school atmosphere - were cited by more than 70%, and a further six - the child's preference for the school, its exam results, the expectation that the child would be happy there, the facilities, the school's discipline policy, and pupils' behaviour in the school - by more than 60%. The other factors cited by more than 50% were school uniform, the way the school was managed, and the school's caring approach to pupils. Just missing the 50% mark were the fact that the child's friends were going to the school, and the influence of the secondary school's headteacher (both 49.8%) and the nearness or convenience of the school (48.2%). The question of single-sex education was mentioned by a total of 17.1% of the respondents as a factor, suggesting it was not important.

When these influences are considered by reference to the school which was preferred, however, some differences emerge. The pattern at school 3 was very similar to that for the four schools overall: the same factors scored over 70%, and only two of the twelve cited above received less than 50% citation (the way the school was managed, which dropped to 48.1%, and the caring approach to pupils, cited by only 40.5% - the biggest difference from the whole sample). The fact that children's friends were going to the school rose to 51.9%. The other three schools all show some striking differences.

At school two, fifteen factors were cited by more than 50% of respondents, and although eleven of these were in the top twelve of the sample as a whole, their relative position often changed. The biggest difference was the influence of the school's headteacher (73.7% against 49.7% for the four schools together), and the

school's caring approach to its pupils (up from 52.3% to 61.7%), while the standard of academic education and the schools' reputation both fell in importance, from 76.2% to 63.5% and 62.9% respectively. This suggests a different set of priorities for the school two parents from those which would appear from a view of the town as a whole.

School four also showed some striking differences from the overall figures. Although eleven of their twelve most frequently cited influences appeared in the overall figures, their order was quite different, with examination results rising fro 64.1% overall to 71.8% here, and the school's caring approach rising too, from 52.3% to 70.4%. But the most striking difference, and not entirely unexpected, was the finding that almost all the references to single sex teaching related to this school - 69% of those who preferred this school cited this as a factor, against 17.1% overall.

The differences between school five and the overall figures were also substantial. There was a stronger emphasis on academic excellence, reputation and discipline - up 12.2%, 10.2% and 14.6% respectively from the overall scores. Uniform was cited by 14% more here than overall, and nearness or convenience by 10% more. Two other factors increased sharply in importance here compared with the overall results: 55.7% cited the fact that an older brother or sister was already at the school, compared with 36.5% overall, and 52.8% cited pupils' behaviour out of school, against 38.6% overall. Interestingly, the importance of the school's caring approach to pupils fells away sharply, from 52.3% overall to 39.2% here.

These general data suggest that the four schools are making differential appeals to their potential clients, who are responding to different factors. The phrasing of the questionnaire may have inclined respondents towards quoting the positive factors rather than negative factors, but even without such negative statements as might be expected it remains clear that parents are coming with a wide range of perspectives on what should influence their choice of secondary school. School five would appear to be favoured strongly by parents who believe in a strong emphasis on traditional "grammar school" values of academic performance, strong discipline, school uniform and public appearances. School four is clearly being picked up on by parents who see their children as benefiting from being taught with others of their own sex, but who also emphasise the importance of having their children looked after by the school, and school two appears to be resting its appeal very strongly upon the charismatic impact of the headteacher, with academic achievement being valued less highly than it is by those who favoured the other schools.

When we examine the factors which were cited as one of the three most important influences which led the parents to choose that particular school, these differences become more apparent. When the overall figures were examined, it was found that five factors stood out as the single most important factor, being cited by more than 7% of all respondents. These were, the standard of academic education, the school's reputation, the belief that the child would be happy there, the school's exam results, and the child's preference. All of these were cited by 7% or more of school 3's respondents, along with the presence at the school of an older brother or sister. At school 2, only three factors were cited by more than 7%: the child's happiness and the child's preference. The other factor which was cited by 12% as the most important single factor, was the school's headteacher. Of the four factors cited by more than 7% of school 4 respondents, only two were shared with the overall sample: the standard of academic education and the child's preference. The other two factors cited here were the school's caring approach, and, by 18.3%, single sex teaching. More than 7% of school 5's respondents cited three factors: the standard of academic education (22.2%), and school's reputation and exam results (13.1% each). The differences can be seen in table 2.

A similar pattern is to be found in the factors cited as one of the three most important influences: indeed, these data strengthen the trend towards differentiated priorities among the parents. The same five factors which topped the list of the single most important factors influencing school choice also topped the list of the three most frequently cited factors, and once again the issue of academic reputation was significantly more frequently mentioned than the others (31.4%; the next most frequent reference was to the child's happiness, which was mentioned by 22%). School 3's listing was identical; school 2 referred to the same three factors, with the headteacher establishing a clear lead over the child's happiness; school 4 cited seven factors in more than 17% of responses, including all five of those cited overall and adding single sex teaching and the school's caring approach, while school 5 replaced the child's preference for the school with the school's discipline policy, but otherwise reflected the overall picture. Table 3 shows the details.

It is clear, then, that although academic standards are important, they are far more important to the parents who aim at school 5 than for any of the others, important though they remain for schools 3 and 4. The clear distinctions between the four schools can be shown by comparing the scores for factors associated with academic achievement and those associated with children's security and happiness across the four schools, as offered by table 4. The low status of many of the child-related factors among the priorities indicated by school 5's parents suggest strong ambitions

and a wish to "push" their children. In this respect, the emphasis upon a caring approach at school 4 is interesting. Discussions with the former head of school 4 about the decision to introduce single-sex teaching reflected a view, which he said was widespread among parents, that the "caring" approach was equated with dealing with less able children: they couldn't be pushed to achieve high academic performance, so this was a way of providing them with a worthwhile educational experience. This school has introduced single-sex classes, and this is by far the most important factor encouraging parents to choose it. Providing single-sex education is often seen as a route to higher academic achievement, particularly for girls. There would seem, then, to be a tension in the motivations to choose school 4. Perhaps the emphasis on caring for their children is seen by parents as desirable to compensate for the lack of social mixing that may occur by providing a more considerate regime?

The high profile accorded to the headteacher of school 2 is worth commenting upon, since this stands out at odds with the importance of the head to parents who chose the other schools. Reference was made at the outset to his determined move to develop a new market in the adjacent authority (see Bennett 1996 for more details), and he took a prominent role in this. One reason for the frequency with which he was cited as a factor may be that he was highly visible at small meetings in the primary schools whence the children came, and presented what was seen as a good case for his school. Although other heads were out in the field doing this (especially the head of school 4, faced with the need to publicise and "sell" an entirely new and different arrangement for teaching the pupils), and were also active making presentations at the open evenings for prospective parents, the head of school 2 seems to have been much more active than the others. However, if he had not also been highly effective at this work, he would have been unable to generate the interest in and support for the school which produced a full enrolment of students in 1995.

Factors and social class.

There is strikingly little contrast between the overall figures and those for either professional/middle or working class respondents to the survey. 59.8% of those responding were categorised as professional or middle class, against 29.2% who were categorised working class (the remaining respondents either could not be categorised or failed to indicate the nature of their work). Thus it is to be expected that the factors influencing middle-class parents will be more similar to the overall picture, and that any discrepancies will be between the overall picture and the opinions of the working-class, and it is indeed the case that the largest difference between middle-class judgements of the most important factor in their choice and the

overall scores is 1.4%, on their evaluation of the importance of the standard of academic education (14.3% against 12.9% overall). However, there are also very few differences of note between the overall scores and those for working-class judgements. Differences from the overall score concerning the most important single factor exceed the size of the middle-class difference indicated above on six occasions, but on only four of these are the numbers large enough to be worth reporting: academic standards are less important (down 2.3% to 10.6% from 12.9%) and the child's preference is more important (up 1.8% to 9.6%). This ought to show a pattern in which the working-class are less concerned about academic performance than their middle-class colleagues, but the working-class figures on exam results also stand 1.7% higher than they are overall, at 9.6%, while the child's happiness, made the most important factor by 8.6% of respondents overall, was only given this rating by 6.9% of the working-class parents.

However, these numbers are necessarily small, and we can obtain a better picture of the factors that influence families' choice of school by looking at the three factors rated as important together. When considering these figures, only two factors cited by the middle class families differ from the overall score by 3% or more: the child's happiness at the school (up 3% to 25%) and the fact that an older sibling is at the school (up 3.1% to 15.4%). This last is reflected in a reverse movement when comparing the overall figures with those for working-class respondents, where it drops from 12.3% to 5.9%. But there are also two other larger differences between the overall and working-class figures. Examination results score more highly as a factor among working class parents (26.7% against 21.4% overall) and the child's happiness is less significant (16% against 22%).

It is also possible to consider whether there were differences on a social class basis on the factors behind preferences for particular schools, and also to identify the extent to which the social mix at each of the school was similar. To take the second question first, schools 3 and 5 showed a stronger professional and middle class presence in the 1995 intake than schools 2 and 4, as shown in table 5, but the differences are not substantial, except insofar as in 1995 school 5 had the largest intake of the four schools. However, they do mean that working-class preferences are likely to have a marginally greater effect on the importance of factors in schools 2 and 4 than in schools 3 and 5.

We turn now to the factors influencing social classes in their choices of individual schools. At school 2, the middle-class parents emphasised three factors above all others, whether cited as the most important single factor or as the three most significant. These were: the child's happiness, the school's headteacher, and the

child's preference. All scored twice as many citations as any other factor. As a single factor, the child's happiness was most important, but when the three most important factors are examined, the headteacher becomes far more important than the others (a score of 38.1% citations, against 30.1% for the child's happiness and 29.0% for the child's preference). Notably absent from the high scores here are any factors concerned with academic performance: indeed, the convenience of the school., with 15.1%, scores more citations than either examination results or the school's academic standards (14.1% and 14.0% respectively). The pattern of citations by working class respondents is less clear cut: only two factors stand clear from the rest as the most important influence - the headteacher and the child's preference - but their scores are much closer to the rest. The pattern is different, however, when the three most important factors influencing working class parents are assessed. Although the most frequently cited factor remains the influence of the headteacher (25.0%), the second ranking factor is the school's examination results, cited by 21.4% of respondents. The child's preference received few citations except from those working class parents for whom it was the most important influence on their choice. The next two factors - academic standards (17.9%) and the child's happiness (17.8%) combine concern for the child's welfare with a much stronger emphasis on academic achievement than their middle class counterparts indicated. Thus this school appears to have some distinct patterns of response: a very strong rejection of academic factors as an influence by middle-class parents and an equally strong emphasis upon them by working-class parents - but all under the strong influence of the headteacher.

School 3 respondents also show a small number of very strong influences on their choice. Among middle-class respondents, one factor in particular - academic standards - stood out from the rest, being cited by 16.3% as the single most important factor. The next highest score, shared by the child's happiness and preference, the school's reputation, and the presence of an older brother or sister at the school, was only 9.1%. Academic standards were also cited by 15.2% of working-class respondents, along with the school's reputation (also 15.2%) and examination results (13.0%). The next most frequent factor, the child's happiness, was cited by fewer than 9%. When the responses for the three most influential factors were examined, there was again strong similarity between the two classes in the most frequent citations: academic standards, examination results, the school's reputation and the child's preference were cited by around 20% or more of both classes, although receiving much higher scores from working class respondents, as shown in table 6. Middle-class parents also stressed the child's happiness, which shared top rank with academic standards, in marked contrast to its overall

importance to working-class families (6.7%). This school, then, would appear to have a more homogeneous appeal to both working class and middle class parents.

At school 4, the strong emphasis on single-sex teaching as a major influence is clear in both working-class and middle-class responses, topping the list in both (19.0% middle class, 21.7% working-class). Thereafter some differences emerge, with the school's caring approach and its academic standards gaining citations as the most important factor by 11.4% and 10.1% of middle-class parents, while 17.4% of working class parents cited the child's preference, and no other factor broke the 10% barrier. However, when the three most important factors are examined, we find that the same seven factors top the list in each case, and in almost the same order, although the relative weightings attached to each appear to vary. These figures are shown in table 7. The only difference of note between the two groups is over the importance of the child's preference, which is cited by 34.8% of working class parents against 20.3% of middle-class parents.

The school four data suggest a much more complex set of factors than is obvious among the data for schools 2 and 3. The issue of single-sex teaching is clearly a major consideration, which sets this school apart from the others, and we shall examine the nature of this influence shortly. However, the striking nature of this school's parents' responses is in its almost equal attention to children's happiness and academic achievement. This was the only school whose parents indicated that they were influenced to a substantial degree by the school's caring approach to its pupils, and it was unique also in that this factor was referred to in equal measure by both working and middle-class parents.

If school 4 has a complex but remarkably homogeneous set of factors influencing all their parents regardless of their class, school 5 has an equally homogeneous but far more straightforward appeal, which is even stronger to its working-class than to its middle-class parents. The top three factors cited as the most important, and the four most important listed by respondents as being the three most important influences on their choice of school, are identical, and stand well clear of any other influences. Table 8 gives the figures for the frequency with which the four factors were cited.

It is worth pointing out again that school 5's parents were more strongly middle-class than the other schools', followed by school 3. This might suggest that those parents who were not middle-class would be more likely to adopt the values of the middle-class majority, and perhaps, indeed, to adopt them more strongly - as these figures suggest. It certainly suggests a very strong difference between the value-systems of the two parent bodies for schools 4 and 5, which is all the more important

given that their PAAs are adjacent, and that for most of school 4's PAA, access to school 5 is as easy as it is to school 4. Between these two schools there appears to be a substantial distinction.

Is geography a factor?

The issue of homogeneity may also be worth pursuing in relation to the geographical origins of the children. It will be recalled that school 2's parental emphases seemed less consistent across classes. Is it possible to identify any geographical patterns in where the children live that might allow us to explain this? Do we, for example, find that school 2's children come from two distinct areas of the town, whereas all school 5's children originate in one particular estate? By using the postcodes of the respondents, it was possible to do some rough identification of where each school drew its 1995 intake from, and we have been able to update these data for the 1996 intake. We also have data showing the distribution of middle and working class respondents across postal areas, though not at present how that distribution relates to their preference of school. The 1996 data show little change from those for 1995, except that there may be some slight consolidation of the distribution of pupil addresses further away from the school as a result of the bus transport which the schools are laying on for their pupils. This transport, incidentally, is not free and can be expensive.

It is certainly the case that clear patterns can be discerned in three of the four school populations examined. School 2 draws from its PAA within the central and northern areas of our town, which includes a large working class estate whose inhabitants remained loyal to the school throughout its darkest days in the late 1980s, and from the north and north-west of the metropolitan authority to the west. This area is one of mixed population with some very large working-class estates and small enclaves of non-manual and middle class populations. It appears to be the middle class enclaves which are opting to send their children to school 2, since the schools in this part of the authority have poor reputations compared with those in the south of the borough, and school 2 now lays on coaches (for a charge) into this area. School 3, bedevilled by a very small-population middle-class PAA, draws from that area, from the middle-class villages to the north (which it shares almost exclusively with school 4), and from an area on the eastern border of the neighbouring authority. Once again, this consists of a very large working class estate and a smaller, older, area of private housing, with a mainly non-manual population. Once again, they appear to be looking east to our town for a better education for their children than is available locally.

School 5 has the most "local" set of pupils, drawing heavily from within its catchment area and from the wealthier villages to the north. It also continues to draw smaller numbers of pupils from the areas to the east of our town, whence it originally drew the extra pupils on which it built its enhanced reputation in the 1980s, despite the rising reputation of the schools in the small town to the east. This geographically concentrated pupil population derives from the wealthiest areas of the town.

School 4 has a much more varied population, which is much harder to classify. Whereas the other three schools show relatively little competition between different areas outside the immediate confines of the town, school 4 draws its children from a wider and more scattered source. It draws heavily from its very small PAA, and from the northern villages, but thereafter, except for a small group from the area to the west of our town which is dominated by school 3, its students do not concentrate in any particular area. This would confirm the sense of the data on factors influencing choice of school, that parents chose this school as a deliberate decision on the basis of a particular kind of educational provision, rather than from a general sense of academic merit.

More careful analysis of this information is necessary before any conclusions can be drawn, but it may be that the newly-accessed population of the neighbouring authority which is turning to school 2 may be introducing a new emphasis on the children's motivation and happiness at the school as a means of promoting their success in secondary school. Schools 3 and 5 would appear to be reinforcing established values, and drawing applications from people who espouse those values, whereas school 4 is making a distinctive appeal to parents of all social groups on the basis of a different approach to the organisation of teaching. Thus, with the possible exception of school 2, the geographical location of pupils' homes does not appear to have any effect on the factors influencing parents' choice of school.

Single sex - important, positive or negative?

We have already pointed out that the decision to introduce single-sex teaching at school 4 was a major factor in many families' choice of the school. This would suggest that its influence was essentially positive. It is notable, too, that the distribution of residence of its children is different from the other three schools: whereas their pupils tend to originate from particular areas, including their PAAs, the school 4 distribution is far more scattered. This is likely to generate more problems for the school in the future in terms of liaising with feeder schools over transfer and transition, but this issue is outside the scope of this study.

However, although it has clearly struck a chord with sufficient potential parents for the school's numbers to become very healthy, it may be that it has also put many families off, so creating an even more distinctive market than appears to be developing from the priorities cited by parents when discussing the influences on their choice of school. To find out how much the factor was seen in both positive negative terms, respondents were asked specifically if it had influenced their decision, and if so, in what ways. A total of 27.7% of all respondents indicated that it had influenced their decision, and most of them- 72.9% - said that it had done so positively. However, one-fifth of all these statements, including one-quarter of all the statements that it had influenced their decision positively, appear to have been made by parents who actually would have preferred to have sent their children to a school outside the town. When we take the respondents whose stated preference was for one of the four schools in the study, we find a total of 25.7% who stated the factor to have been an influence, of whom 68.8% saw it positively.

In the case of the three schools which had not introduced this arrangement, the overwhelming majority of respondents stated that it was not applicable: 89.2% for school 2, 87.3% for school 3, and 83.5% for school 5. Even at school 4, where this initiative had been undertaken, 31% of the parents who saw this school as their first preference school stated that it had no bearing upon their choice. The figures relating to this question are summarised in table 9.

Analysis of the replies which saw single-sex teaching as an important influence suggests that we can group the positive responses into three categories: those who believed that the result would be a more positive learning environment with fewer distractions for the child; those saw the arrangement as providing, so to speak, the "best of both worlds", providing the opportunity for social mixing but ensuring that during lessons they avoided distractions; and those who were unconvinced by the idea but were won over by the arguments put forward at the parents' open evening, which included the opportunity to hear parents of the school's most recent intake ("year 7") talking of their children's reaction to the classes. Other positive comments included the school being second best, in the absence of a single-sex school, or their daughter preferred the idea. A small number of parents expressed approval of the initiative, but still sent their children elsewhere among out four schools - almost all of them to the most traditional school (school 5), and usually because their daughter ultimately persuaded them that she wished to join her friends at school 5. It was apparent from the statements that these parents associated single-sex education with selective or private education, and this meant that they were happy for their daughter (it was always parents of a daughter who produced these answers) to attend

school five because of its superior academic reputation in the community, a reputation which was not borne out by its examination results at either 16+ or 18+ until after the survey being reported here was completed. Single-sex education and academic achievement appear to be potential trade-offs for such parents.

It is worthwhile to explore the answers to this question on the survey a little further. In what follows, we shall take the statements from all respondents, including those who favoured other schools but nevertheless accepted places at one of our four subject schools. Given the strong association in the popular press between girls' under-achievement, their failure to take up science subjects at advanced levels, and the move towards single-sex teaching, it was anticipated that there would be more positive statements about school 4's initiative from parents who were choosing secondary schools for their daughters than from those choosing for their sons. This, however, was not apparent. Exactly 50% of all the statements made on this issue came from boys' parents. 73.8% of all statements made by parents of girls viewed the initiative positively , against 67.8% from parents of boys.

One of the most commonly stated reasons for favouring school 4's introduction of single-sex teaching was that it presented "the best of both worlds". Children would have the benefits of social mixing in societies, clubs, and the playground, but would be able to concentrate on their work in the classroom without having to worry about the forms of gender-stereotyping which often bedevil adolescent classes. This "best of both worlds" did not in itself occur more frequently among parents of either boys or girls, but there were some differences in the language that was used. In particular, parents of boys were far more likely than parents of girls to write of fewer distractions in the classroom if girls were absent, of the removal of what one parent called "the adverse influence of earlier puberty among the girls", and the possibility of the teacher imposing stronger discipline. 41.8% of all the comments by school 4 parents on the single-sex initiative addressed this question, and comments from boys' parents outnumbered comments from girls parents by almost two to one. The 37.7% of comments which referred to the idea that their child would be more successful in single sex classes showed a more than two-to-one bias towards girls' parents, and it was clear that boys' parents tended to favour the arrangement because they felt that their son was less academic and would not do so well against the pressure of girls' higher achievement.

One further theme is worth mentioning, although it is weaker than the others identified here. Some parents, particularly those applying to school 4 (or other schools in our town) from the neighbouring metropolitan authority, were keen to obtain single-sex education but looked outside their own authority as the only

single-sex schools there which were seen to be satisfactory were heavily over-subscribed schools affiliated to the Roman Catholic Church. A significant number of these parents were in fact Roman Catholics who had failed to obtain places at these schools for their children: school 4, with its "half-way house" arrangement of single-sex classes in a mixed school environment, was seen to be the best second-best that could be obtained. Once again, there appeared to be a trade-off between single-sex education and the school's reputation for academic achievement.

Discussion.

The differences between the schools in the factors which count most in influencing parents to choose them shows that the market in education is not as simple as some might suggest. Even in a relatively homogeneous social area such as is under study here, where academic achievement might be expected to outstrip all other factors in importance, we find some divergence from this. The differences between the parents' priorities in choosing schools for their children do not strike one so much as ideological as deriving from a complex of practical concerns and a wish to do the best one can for one's child. As was said in relation to the single-sex issue, the way that some parents favoured the arrangements at school 4 but allowed their daughter to go to school 5 because her friends were going there and it was easier to get to, or accepted a mixed school which taught the sexes separately as the nearest they could get to a single-sex education, suggests that the choice of school may be a complex trade-off between factors and how that trade-off is executed will vary from person to person. Nor should it be assumed to be a logically executed activity: for example, a small number of respondents to the single-sex question indicated that they were strongly opposed to it as a means of educating their child, but also showed that their first preference school was a single-sex grammar school!

This is not to say that individual values are not important. It was clear that parents who chose school 5 placed far less emphasis on providing a caring environment for their children at school than those who looked elsewhere, even though only school 4 parents made this a clear priority (school 2 and 3 showed this to be more important to their parents than school 5, but not scoring high enough to be discussed earlier). Perhaps the difference is summed up by the parent who had chosen school 5, who stated that school 4's single-sex teaching arrangement was attractive as it kept the boys away from the girls, but the school was not acceptable because of its "mummy-cuddling" atmosphere of caring.

The social class composition of the four schools studied was similar, and we found considerable consistency of attitude and emphasis across the social classes, except

for a strong sense among the middle-class who chose school 2 that academic achievement was a less important factor than among any other definable group. This appeared to stand at odds with the priorities of this school's working-class parents, and it could be that this presages some dispute between the two groups in their expectations of the school. Another explanation may be that although they were choosing the least highly-performing school in the town in academic terms, the working-class parents saw its achievement as important because they doubted their children's capacity to cope with what they feared may be an over-demanding regime at one of the other schools. School 2 would therefore be able to provide a better academic opportunity for their children because its standards would be lower, or, alternatively, it would be more sensitive to the needs of less able children. Unfortunately, we do not have any data to pursue this issue further.

First analysis of the geographical data do not suggest that the location of a pupil's home is significant in terms of the attitudes expressed in the survey, and much more attention will be paid to these data. However, it is clear that school 5 is the nearest the town has to a "neighbourhood" school, catering for the children in its PAA. Schools 3 and 2 also appear to cater for definite areas of the locality, but these are more scattered rather than closely established around the school. School 4 has clearly established a different basis for its appeal, and this is reflected in the way that its children come from a scattered area rather than from particular localities.

Single-sex teaching is clearly a positive reason for choice far more often than it is a negative reason for rejecting the school. Parents who did not choose this school rarely referred to it as an issue. Where it provoked a negative response, it was frequently on ideological grounds - it is "wrong", the parents "would not consider this approach". Positive reasons included such statements as it "made me choose this school" or was "the defining factor" in the choice of schools, but most statements in support of the policy were more pragmatic, relating to the extent to which their child was seen to benefit from the arrangements. However, there appeared to be a difference between boys and girls' parents as to the benefits which accrued, with girls' parents stressing achievement whereas boys' parents stressed concentration and discipline. This difference will be explored further.

It will be recalled that we raised three points in the light of our initial discussion of the background situation to the study. We have certainly found that the distribution of children who attend the four schools in the town is now from a much wider area than hitherto, which is bound to be having a significant impact on the local market in the neighbouring authority. Precise figures cannot be produced because the postal codes do not match perfectly with local authority boundaries, but as many as one

quarter of the children who started at these four schools in 1995 and 1996 may come from the metropolitan authority, while a further six to seven per cent may come from other parts of the county of which our town is a part, drawing children away from the schools there. The market which is being created by these schools is no longer a local competitive arena, around which a fairly clear boundary can be drawn: it is a market which overlaps increasingly with those around it, and the reasons for this extension need to be explored. Data will be sought on this point, but some comments in the survey appear to suggest that the allocation policy of the local authority and the schools within it is seen to be far less flexible than that of our schools, which operate independent policies since they are no longer part of the local authority system, being "grant maintained".

The appeal which our schools make is at first sight largely homogeneous, but they present different interpretations of the broad concern for academic standards and high achievement. These, however, do not suggest that in making this appeal and trying to differentiate themselves to some extent from the other schools in the town, they are attempting to address a multi-faceted set of concerns. The same set of concerns as can be identified among the surrounding areas to the town also appear to be present in the town. Whether this means that the schools in this study are picking up on what is a minority concern in the neighbouring authority, or that these concerns are common to educational markets throughout the region, is beyond the scope of this study.

There are different reasons for choosing schools. The simplest set is clearly to be found in the parental body which has chosen school 5: academic reputation, academic results, and discipline. The most complex surrounds school 4, stressing academic performance but also emphasising pastoral concerns. Overall, there are a large number of factors which are taken into account, but relatively few are widely shared. It may be possible to distinguish between primary factors and secondary factors: primary factors might be those cited by more than 20% of respondents as significant, while secondary factors scored lower. On these data, we could then isolate five primary factors: the standard of academic education; the child's happiness at the school; the school's reputation; the school's examination results; and the child's preference for the school. This also allows us to identify four other important factors which are significant to minorities within the overall population, but incline them towards particular schools: the characteristics of the headteacher; teaching in single-sex classes; the school's caring approach to its pupils; and its policy on discipline. Within these factors, the particular configuration of

priorities among the parent body of a particular school will vary according to the perceptions of the qualities of education provided.

The last question that was posed was whether we can the differentiation between schools which has been precipitated by the move into single-sex teaching by school 4 has led us to be able to identify several markets at work here. The present answer of the author is probably not, but there is clearly a niche developing which is drawing pupils to school 4 from a wide area of the locality, and causing many of them either to pass by other schools on the way, or, where there is a choice of transport, deliberately to choose this school rather than any other. In this sense, school 4's strategy appears to have been highly successful. The strategy of school 2 appears to have been less immediately obvious: it may have been simply an aggressive attempt to publicise its availability in areas where this has not previously been done. If this is so, then the extent to which it retains its rather idiosyncratic set of factors, emphasising the role of the headteacher and the child's preference and downplaying academic achievement, may be influenced over time by other factors. The repeat of the survey with the 1997 intake of the four schools, which has just been agreed, will provide us with more information on the extent and nature of the success of our local schools in developing a market in which they can all thrive.

References

Bagley, C., Woods, P.A. and Glatter, R. (1996) *Scanning the Market: School Strategies for Discovering Parental Perspectives.* ***Educational Management and Administration***, Vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 125-138

Bennett, N.D. (1996) ***Product Differentiation and Parental Choice: the Workings of the Educational Market in an English Shire County.*** Paper presented to the 1996 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New York.

Glatter, R., Woods, P.A. and Bagley, C. (eds.) (1997) ***Choice and Diversity in Schooling: Perspectives and Prospects.*** London, Routledge.

Woods, P (1994) ***Parents and Choice in Local Competitive Arenas: First Findings from the PASCI study.*** Paper presented to the 1994 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans.

Table 1: the schools in the district.

School	Size*	character	location	origins
1	5 f.e‡.	R.C. girls' convent ("aided")	main town centre	convent grammar school
2.	8 f.e.	mixed state	ten minutes walk from main town centre	secondary modern school
3.	8 f.e.	mixed state	five minutes walk from main town centre	former girls' grammar school
4.	8 f.e.	mixed state	two miles north-east of main town centre, on edge of development: one mile from major rail junction	former mixed technical grammar school
5.	8 f.e.	mixed state	three miles east of main town centre, in major private development: one mile from major rail junction	two single sex secondary modern schools on adjacent sites.
6.	6 f.e.	mixed state	in largest village, five miles from main town	former village secondary modern

*f.e = forms of entry: nominally 30 children per form of entry.
‡ This school was originally 4 f.e., but when it became self-governing (grant maintained) it was required to expand to five f.e. by the Department for Education.

Table 2: factors cited as most important single influence by 7% or more respondents.

Factor	Overall	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Standard of academic education	12.9%		15.8%	9.9%	22.2%
School's reputation	8.9%		11.4%		13.1%
Child's happiness	8.6%	12.0%	9.5%		6.3%
Exam results	7.9%		7.6%		13.1%
child preferred school	7.8%	9.6%	7.6%	9.9%	4.5%
Brother or sister at the school			7.0%		
Single sex teaching				18.3%	

Table 3: Factors cited as among the three most important influences on school choice by more than 17% of respondents.

Factor	Overall	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
standard of academic education	31.4		32.2	28.9	47.3
child will be happy there	22.0	24.0	24.1	23.2	17.1
school's reputation	21.8		28.3	17.5	33.0
exam results	21.4		21.5	17.6	26.6
child preferred the school	19.6	21.6	19.6	23.2	
secondary school's headteacher		30.4			
single sex teaching				36.6	
school's caring approach to pupils				21.1	
policy on discipline					26.6

Table 4: "Academic" and "child centred" factors compared across schools: cited as the most important factor.

Factor	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Exam results	6.6%	7.6%	3.5%	13.1%
Standard of academic education	3.0%	15.8%	9.9%	22.2%
School reputation	4.2%	11.4%	6.3%	13.1%
policy on discipline	3.6%	1.3%	1.4%	4.5%
caring approach	4.2%	3.8%	8.5%	1.1%
child will be happy	12.0%	9.5%	6.3%	6.3%

Table 5: social class of school intakes 1995 .

	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Professional/middle	55.7%	62.0%	55.6%	65.3%
Working	33.5%	29.1%	32.4%	22.7%
Unclassifiable/no response	10.8%	8.8%	11.9%	11.9%

Table 6. Five most important factors influencing middle and working class families choosing school 3.

Factor	Working Class %	Middle Class %
Academic standards	39.1	29.5
Examination results	30.4	19.4
School's reputation	28.2	22.5
Child preferred school	19.6	20.4
Facilities	17.4	7.2
Child will be happy	8.7	29.6

Table 7: The influences cited most frequently as one of the three key influences on choice by parents choosing school 4.

Factor	Working-class	Middle-class.
Single-sex teaching	41.2	34.2
Child preferred school	34.8	20.3
Academic standards	26.0	31.7
Caring approach	23.9	24.1
Child will be happy	23.9	23.9
Examination results	15.2	20.3
School's reputation	15.2	20.2

Table 8: Factors cited most frequently among the three most influential on parents' choice of school 5 (percentages).

Factor	Working class	Middle class
Academic standards	52.5	48.7
Exam results	40.0	25.2
School reputation	30.0	32.2
Policy on discipline	30.0	25.2

Table 9: The influence of the single-sex teaching initiative on families one of the four subject schools: % of respondents favouring the schools

	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5
Positive influence				
Better educational environment		1.3	23.9	1.7
Best of both worlds			20.4	0.6
Convinced by the open evening		0.6	6.3	
Other positive comment			12.7	2.8
Viewed initiative positively but other factors more important	1.2		1.4	1.1
Negative influence on decision	9.6	10.1		9.7